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Making the Garden Safe for Democracy

By Jeff Stein

FROM THE ROOFTOPS TO THE subway tunnels, from the Cuban communities across the Hudson to the FALN hangouts in the South Bronx, hundreds of federal agents, city police, and private security guards are sweeping for bombs, trailing kooks, psyching out terrorists, organizing credentials, and generally battening down the city.

Outwardly, security officials project a deliberate attitude of calm about the Democratic National Convention here this week: This is our job; we are professionals; it's all a matter of carefully rehearsed routine. But in the quadrennial turbulence that passes for presidential politics in America, they also know that incidents of some kind are inevitable. The goal becomes simply: Carve four serene days in August out of the traveling show.

Planning for the convention began seven months ago, when representatives of various law-enforcement agencies began to meet with Democratic National Committee (DNC) security consultants Jim McDonnell and Rocky Pomerance to iron out duties and areas of physical responsibility. For the two Florida-based veterans it was just another convention; between them, they've handled a half-dozen national political conventions (both Democratic and Republican), five Super Bowls, ten Miss Universe Pageants, and the 1977 International Women's Year gathering, in Houston.

McDonnell talks softly as he sits in his New York Statler office, across from the convention site, at Madison Square Garden. Two easels behind him display detailed charts of the Garden complex.

Ask him if he's worried about any-

thing happening and he talks about his team of 600 handpicked aides, managers, ushers, clerks, secretaries, and doormen. "I have people I trust." Ask him again and he passes out more laurels. "I'm working with a police force that knows what it's doing," he says with a smile.

FROM THE FIRST SECURITY meeting, in February, the most impeding challenge for officials has been to coordinate the complementary and often overlapping areas of authority. The DNC runs the convention, deciding who gets in and who doesn't, based on its power to issue credentials. The Secret Service protects the president, the candidates, and other designated public officials and their families. Even the CIA's worldwide cloak-and-dagger network is plugged into the system, with agents shadowing terrorists and cruising the convention for contacts among the diplomatic crowd. But the city, basically, belongs to the New York City police. They have the job of keeping the streets clear, the delegates moving, and the lid on.

NYPD Assistant Police Chief Joseph Preiss says he's fielding a force of some 2,300 uniformed officers for the convention detail and "over a hundred" plainclothes detectives for inside the Garden. A friendly, white-haired man, he talks fondly "of what I like to call my 'special forces.'" These are his troops with "heavy weapons"—shot-

guns, sniper rifles, and tear gas. They can be moved around rapidly by helicopter. Months ago, the police made a map of rooftops around the convention site and are putting sentries on them when the delegates move to and from the Garden and when the president comes and goes.

Another part of the chief's force is working underwater, with frogmen inspecting the heliport piers where the president's helicopter might land. Other police are monitoring the subway tunnels, rail lines, air ducts, and utility terminals around the convention complex. When key guards have to move, four closed-circuit television monitors pick up the watch from the NYPD's on-site command center in a dressing room of the Felt Forum. An on-site videotaping system will allow police to replay significant incidents.

OUTSIDE, OF COURSE, ARE the demonstrations. Jim McDonnell worries about the spark that could turn a peaceful crowd destructive, and promises an open channel of dialogue with protest leaders. "This is simply common sense," he says.

The police, meanwhile, talk about demonstrations matter-of-factly. "We'll keep them on Eighth Avenue, between 31st and 33rd streets, on the post-office side of the Garden," says a detective inspector. And if they overflow these blocks? "What we do then is move them toward Ninth Avenue," the detective says.

City police have also been leading the bomb sweeps. NYPD bomb experts say that since July 1 K-9 teams have been combing the subway entrances, air ducts, water, power, and communi-

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